

The Ethics of Nobility in Three Tragedies of Sophocles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter I: The <i>Ajax</i>	4
Chapter 2: The <i>Philoctetes</i>	15
Chapter 3: The <i>Oedipus at Colonus</i>	21
Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography.....	32

INTRODUCTION

One of the central themes that pervades the tragedies of Sophocles is that of how humans relate to one another: how an individual relates to society and how self-interest is reconciled with the common good. Sophocles' tragedies explore the concept of human political success – that is, what constitutes the best communal bond – by exploring the human condition, what attributes, virtues, and vices bring about success or failure. This thesis will examine what constitutes 'success' in Sophocles' tragedies by examining the most 'successful' characters, their ethics, and their actions.

Sophocles' masterful use of comparison enables a detailed analysis of characterization, ethics, and politics and, in particular, a study of the roles of emotion and reason in deliberation in his plays. The characters of Sophocles and their ethics have been the subject of detailed inquiry already with Bernard Knox's *The Heroic Temper* and Mary Whitlock Blundell's *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* being the standard texts in this area. In regard to emotion's role in tragedy Oliver Taplin's *Greek Tragedy in Action* provides an appealing argument, although it is primarily concerned with the audience's reception rather than with the text and the emotions of the characters themselves. Aristotle's *Poetics*, while indispensable in the study of tragedy, is famously problematic, because his attempt at codifying the rules of dramatic composition is at times discordant with the plays themselves. His notion that tragedy through pity and fear prompts a catharsis of emotion is particularly puzzling.¹ This thesis, in examining character types across three of Sophocles' plays, will instead firstly ask why some characters are 'successful' while others are not; and secondly,

¹ *Poetics*, 1449b 23-28.

examine those secondary characters often overlooked in favor of the more dazzling primary characters, with this approach in turn providing a different perspective to aid understanding of the primary characters themselves.

This thesis will argue that those characters who are the most successful on both the personal and political levels are the very same characters who are marked as ‘noble’ (γενναῖος, εὐγενής) and that their nobility is shown to be determined by their ethics, decisions, and actions, rather than by their birth. Several questions will be explored. What are the limits to success and happiness in the plays? How do the noble characters perceive and comprehend the world around them so that they are able to attain success? What is the relationship between their emotions and their reason? What are the actions that their nobility of character demands? How is nobility of birth related to nobility of character? Why do other characters not see and think as the noble characters do? What is the antithesis of nobility and what are its attributes? This thesis will attempt to provide some answers.

In each chapter, I will examine one play and the character types within it, throughout drawing upon Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* for precise definitions of certain emotions and the *Nicomachean Ethics* for Aristotle’s thoughts on ethics. In the first chapter – concerned with the noble Odysseus and ignoble Atreidae of the *Ajax* – I will explore the ethics of a noble man by analyzing the characters according to the definitions of nobility given in the play. In the second chapter – concerned with the noble Neoptolemus and ignoble Odysseus of the *Philoctetes* – I will investigate how a character attains nobility. In the third chapter – concerned with the noble Theseus and ignoble Creon of the *Oedipus at Colonus* – I will examine more closely the rationale behind a character’s nobility. I will conclude by arguing that the findings of this survey can further inform our understanding of tragedy, and hope to

demonstrate that tragedy is particularly useful for presenting a discussion on ethics and politics.

The characters and worlds of Sophocles' tragedies are wondrous and complex; for over 2,500 years they have captivated authors, philosophers, psychologists, readers, and theater audiences. Their abiding popularity for not only the student but also the layperson is testament to the truth that an understanding of Sophocles' characters constitutes not merely as an academic exercise but also an invitation to understand more about ourselves: who we are, and why. If so, Sophocles' tragedies retain immense power.

CHAPTER I: THE *AJAX*

The first definition of ‘nobility’ in the *Ajax* is provided by Ajax himself. Having awakened from his madness, Ajax has decided he cannot bear to live with the twofold shame of his dishonor and his thwarted attempt at retribution for his dishonor (437-456). He particularly dreads the ridicule of the Atreidae and his father’s lowered opinion of him (457-472). He is disillusioned by society because its system of rewards, supposedly based on merit, is revealed to be based on the whim of the leaders. In lines 473-480, he begins to question the point of existence and ends with the abrupt statement that “a *eugenes* must live honorably or die honorably” (479-480).² While showing that Ajax seeks to be measured against a standard of nobility, this passage is otherwise too narrow to be of any real use in understanding what constitutes nobility. Responding to this speech, Tecmessa gives a more useful definition of what a noble man should and should not be.

She begins by declaring that there is no greater evil for a human than the fate of compulsion (485-486), and then provides a personal example to support her point. She herself was forced to become Ajax’s bride and will be forced to undergo again the same compulsion, but this time with a Trojan, if Ajax commits suicide. Her fate is directly tied with his: “... on you rests all my safety” (519). In addition, his father, mother, and, above all, his son depend upon Ajax. Tecmessa ends her speech with an appeal to Ajax’s sense of honor and nobility. Her call for pity is a call for action:

² N.B. All translations given are my own.

Ajax, 520-524.

ἀλλ' ἴσχε κάμοῦ μνήστιν· ἀνδρί τοι χρεὼν
μνήμην προσεῖναι, τερπνὸν εἴ τί που πάθῃ.
χάρις χάριν γάρ ἐστιν ἢ τίκτους' αἰεί·
οὔτου δ' ἀπορρεῖ μνήστις εὖ πεπονθότος,
οὐκ ἂν λέγοιτ' ἔθ' οὔτος εὐγενὴς ἀνὴρ.

So remember even me; mark well that a man
ought to keep memory alive if ever he
experienced any good thing. For kindness always
begets kindness; but whoever lets the memory of
a past good done to him slip away, he can no
longer be called noble.

Central to Tecmessa's view of nobility is the idea of reciprocity: *charis* begets *charis* (522). *Charis*, according to Aristotle, is "the feeling in respect to which the one who has it is said to render a service to him who needs it not in return for something nor so that others may render some service to him but it is done for the sake of the recipient."³ Because *charis*⁴ is proportionate not to what a person deserves but to what he needs, this reciprocity is not rooted in retributive justice but generosity. According to Tecmessa, vital to the action of generosity in the present is the remembrance of generosity in the past. Through the emotional appeal that provided the foil for her request, Tecmessa tries to compel Ajax to act with *charis* by reminding him of a past good. She seeks pity, which the chorus immediately grants her while imploring Ajax to do the same (525-526).

Tecmessa's request for remembrance and pity provides both context and direction for Ajax's ethical deliberation. In invoking the past, she shows how Ajax is not the only one to suffer from the scales of fate: she too went from good fortune to bad through compulsion rather than by any choice of her own. In listing probable future consequences, she tries to influence Ajax's decision by showing what adversity might result from his suicide. She wishes Ajax to see himself in relation to others and subsequently to act with *charis*. Whether

³ *Rhetoric*, 2.7.2.

⁴ The term '*charis*' encapsulates both the act and feeling of generosity.

or not Ajax himself is noble is debatable, but the *Ajax* features another character who unequivocally demonstrates *charis* and whose reasoning correlates with Tecmessa's *eugenes aner* – Odysseus.

Odysseus begins the play prowling about trying to determine Ajax's whereabouts in order to avoid being killed. Athena sees him looking "to snatch some opportunity against your enemies" (2-3). He appears to behave according to the traditional Greek ethical code of Help Friends/ Harm Enemies. Ajax acted with hostility (δυσμενεῖ, 18) towards him and so Odysseus, particularly after Athena reveals to him Ajax's motives and the extent of his violence, regards him as a personal enemy (ἐχθρός, 78). He also considers him to be dangerous, and implores Athena not to draw his attention, but is quieted when she promises Odysseus that he will remain safe (74-88). According to the traditional code, Ajax deserves Odysseus' scorn; in fact, Athena tries to goad Odysseus into mocking the fallen hero. However, upon beholding the mad Ajax, and notwithstanding the fact that he hears of the extreme violence intended for him from Ajax's own mouth, Odysseus undergoes a profound change in his view of Ajax. Athena, making a point about the power of the gods, asks Odysseus if he ever knew anyone to be more farsighted or better at doing what the occasion required than Ajax (118-120). He responds:

Ajax, 121-126.

ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδέν' οἶδ' · ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῇ,
ὁθούνεκ' ἅτη συγκατέζευκται κακῇ,
οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμὸν σκοπῶν
ὁρῶ γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
εἶδωλ' , ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν, ἢ κούφην σκιάν.

I know of no one; yet I pity him all the same
in his wretchedness, though he was full of ill-will
towards me, because he is yoked under terrible
blindness. Thinking no more of this man's fate
than mine, I see that we are truly nothing other
than phantoms, all we who live, or fleeting
shadow.

Ajax, once regarded by Odysseus as an *echthros*, a personal enemy, is now considered ‘hostile’ (δυσμενῆ, 122): the ill-will Ajax bears Odysseus is no longer reciprocated. Through pity (ἐποικτίρω, 121), Odysseus sees Ajax as being like him, “a phantom” or “fleeting shadow” (126). Aristotle defines pity and the circumstances that incite pity as follows: “People pity those like them in age, in character, in habits, in purpose, and in birth: for through these particulars it is more apparent to a man that [when something bad happens to one like him] that evil can also happen to him. So it is necessary here to put forth a general premise that whatever things people fear for themselves, when they happen to others pity is aroused in them.”⁵ Odysseus pities Ajax because he perceives that, as mortals, they share a similar birth and the common enemy of *ate*. In its original sense, *ate* was connected with physical blindness⁶ and therefore aptly describes Ajax’s inability to see with the physical eye what he is really doing, and with the eye of the mind that his actions are unjust. In addition, Richard Doyle points out that in this play *ate* is associated with *moros*, fate, “which Sophocles consistently uses to signify ‘death’.”⁷ Ajax’s *ate* is, therefore, both his blindness and the death that blindness brings. Odysseus, in seeing himself in Ajax and in seeing their common humanity, extrapolates Ajax’s *ate* to describe the blindness that all humans by their very nature are subject to. His earlier statement that “we know nothing for certain; we are all at sea” (23) captures this blindness that constitutes the fundamental obstacle to human happiness.

⁵ *Rhetoric*, 2.8.3.

⁶ Cf. *Iliad* 16.805.

⁷ Doyle, p. 5.

It is important to note that his reasoning and pity are a direct result of his seeing Ajax in person; otherwise he might continue to operate under strict self-interest. Although beginning as a visceral action, his pity becomes a rational response through his awareness of self and how he relates to another. Therefore, like Tecmessa's *eugenes aner*, Odysseus' deliberation involves both reason and emotion, namely pity; but what Odysseus's speech shows is that his deliberation explicitly begins with pity, which leads to a conscious awareness of man's helplessness – the realization that Tecmessa's speech begins with. The nature of his response to Ajax's predicament is put into the larger context of the human condition, and his actions later in the play demonstrate that his reasoning leads to his giving *charis* (1354) to Ajax by advocating his burial despite the opposition of the Atreidae.

Odysseus has all the markings of a noble man: his reasoning is initiated by pity and in turn leads to an action of *charis*. Why, however, should we view Tecmessa's definition and Odysseus' example as truly correlating with nobility, particularly if humans by nature have a tendency to misjudge? An external authority is required, and it is given by the goddess Athena. In response to Odysseus' speech where he pities Ajax, Athena says:

Ajax, 127- 133.

τοιαῦτα τοίνυν εἰσορῶν ὑπέρκοπον
μηδέν ποτ' εἶπης αὐτὸς ἐς θεοὺς ἔπος,
μηδ' ὄγκον ἄρη μηδέν', εἴ τινος πλέον
ἢ χειρὶ βρίθεις ἢ μακροῦ πλούτου βάθει·
ὥς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν
ἅπαντα τὰνθρώπεια· τοὺς δὲ σῶφρονας
θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοῦς.

Therefore in respecting these things you yourself never speak an arrogant word against the gods, nor take upon yourself any self-importance, if fate's scales make you weightier than another in power or in the extent of immense wealth; as a day tips the scale down on all human affairs, so it raises them back up; and so it is the men of sense the gods love and the bad they hate.

Athena affirms Odysseus' ethics⁸ and further emphasizes how a man should act with an awareness of what is immutable and what is not. According to the goddess, a *sophron* is not arrogant towards gods or men. He does not ascribe to himself an undeserved sense of self-importance in relation to humans because he is aware of the fickleness of fortune (129-130), nor in relation to the gods because he is aware of their superior power (128). The resulting knowledge is an awareness of the human condition's frailty. Because Athena's definition of a *sophron*, particularly in regards to his awareness of time and the human condition, is so similar to Tecmessa's *eugenes aner*, Tecmessa's description is given greater authority. Odysseus, then, is a combination of Athena's *sophron* and Tecmessa's *eugenes aner*. The *sophron*, however, in addition to being like the *eugenes aner* and knowing how to behave correctly towards other humans, knows how to act correctly towards the gods; because the *eugenes aner* is therefore a subset of the *sophron*,⁹ *sophrosyne* is the virtue that leads to ethical nobility.¹⁰

In the general Greek conception, *sophrosyne* is the embodiment of the two maxims on the temple to Apollo at Delphi: "know thyself" and "nothing in excess." Helen North defines *sophrosyne* as basically "soundness of mind" that is "the state of having one's intellect

⁸ Smyth's *Greek Grammar* states that τοιοῦτος "generally refers to what precedes" (Smyth, 1245).

⁹ Athena's contrast of the *sophron* with the *kakos* and the similarity between the *sophron* and the *eugenes aner* invites another interpretation of *kakos*. *Kakos* is often used elsewhere to describe a member of the lower class, but as this term for a low-born man is contrasted with the *sophron* who is ethically noble, *kakos* would suggest someone who is ethically ignoble. Being low-born, therefore, doesn't mean so much one who is lower in birth as one who chooses to act in a manner beneath his nature. Teucer in his speech in lines 1266-1315 argues this point. He shows the discrepancy between the noble Atreidae's ignoble behavior and contrasts them with his own actions that are noble regardless of his ignoble birth.

¹⁰ *Sophrosyne* manifested in action towards human beings is nobility and towards the gods is *eusebeia*. As Sophocles' plays are more concerned with human matters than human-divine relations, it makes sense that the questions of what constitutes nobility are more prominent than what constitutes *eusebeia*.

unimpaired.”¹¹ She notes that the emotions are a part of *sophrosyne*, which she defines as “‘saving *phronêsis*’ (as the traditional etymology has it) from the assaults of appetite and passion but at the same time making use of their motive power to reach goals unattainable without them.”¹² This word, then, aptly describes both the self-knowledge and moderation that results from Odysseus’ reasoning and the reasoning itself. As the etymology of the word indicates, *sophrosyne* is ‘healthy thinking’; that is, having a well-balanced *phren*. *LSJ* states that the *phren* is the seat of both reason and the emotions.¹³ *Sophrosyne*, then, would be a balance between emotion and reason rather than a purgation of the emotions. Odysseus achieves this balance of *phren* by basing his ethical deliberation on rationalizing his pity. His *sophrosyne* is neither a purely visceral emotion nor strict practical thinking; after all, practical thinking would have him continue to treat Ajax as a personal enemy.

If Odysseus is noble in character, then it naturally follows that his ethical opponents, the Atreidae, are ignoble. Yet the Atreidae claim to possess *sophrosyne* and to act out of a sense of nobility. Their definitions of these two terms are very different from the definitions provided by Tecmessa and Athena, and their subsequent actions are the opposite of the *charis* of Odysseus.

¹¹ North, p. x.

¹² North, p. x.

¹³ *LSJ* further defines the first meaning of the *phren* (φρήν), meaning ‘midriff,’ as follows: ‘**2. heart**, as seat of the passions, e.g. of fear, “τρομέοντο δέ οἱ φρένες ἐντός” *Il.10.10*; of joy and grief, “φρένα τέρπεσθαι φόρμιγγι” *9.186*; “γάννται φρένα ποιμήν” *13.493*; “τί σε φρένας ἵκετοπένθος” *1.362*; “ἄχος πύκασε φρένας” *8.124*; “ἔρως φρένας ἀμφεκάλυψε” *3.442*; of anger, *Od.6.147*; of courage, “ἕνα φρεσὶ θυμὸν ἔχοντες” *Il.13.487*; “ἔς φρένα θυμὸς ἀγέρθη” *22.475*, cf. *8.202* etc.’ and as ‘**3. mind**, as seat of the mental faculties, perception, thought, ἔγνω ἦσιν ἐνὶ φ.” *Il.22.296*; “μή μοι ταῦτα νόει φρεσὶ” *9.600*; “μετὰ φρεσὶ μερμηρίζαι, βάλλεσθαι,” *Od.10.438*, *Il.9.434*; “ἴδμεν ἐνὶ φρεσὶν” *2.301*.’

Menelaus believes that Ajax, as a would-be murderer of the high command (1126-1128), should be punished for threatening the fragile stability of the army and by analogy the state:

Ajax, 1071-1090.

καίτοι κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ὄντα δημότην
μηδὲν δικαιοῦν τῶν ἐφεστώτων κλύειν.
οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἂν ἐν πόλει νόμοι καλῶς
φέρωντ' ἂν, ἔνθα μὴ καθεστήκοι δέος,
οὔτ' ἂν στρατός γε σωφρόνως ἄρχοιτ' ἔτι,
μηδὲν φόβου πρόβλημα μηδ' αἰδοῦς ἔχων.
ἀλλ' ἄνδρα χρή, κὰν σῶμα γεννήσῃ μέγα,
δοκεῖν πεσεῖν ἂν κὰν ἀπὸ μικροῦ κακοῦ.
δέος γὰρ ὅς τις πρόσεστιν αἰσχύνῃ θ' ὁμοῦ,
σωτηρίαν ἔχοντα τόνδ' ἐπίστασο·
ὅπου δ' ὑβρίζειν δρᾷν θ' ἃ βούλεται παρῇ,
ταύτην νόμιζε τὴν πόλιν χρόνῳ ποτὲ
ἐξ οὐρίων δραμοῦσαν εἰς βυθὸν πεσεῖν.
ἀλλ' ἐστάτω μοι καὶ δέος τι καίριον,
καὶ μὴ δοκῶμεν δρῶντες ἂν ἡδόμεθα
οὐκ ἀντιτείσσειν αὐθις ἂν λυπώμεθα.
ἔρπει παραλλὰς ταῦτα. πρόσθεν οὗτος ἦν
αἰθῶν ὑβριστής, νῦν δ' ἐγὼ μέγ' αὖ φρονῶ.
καὶ σοι προφωνῶ τόνδε μὴ θάπτειν, ὅπως
μὴ τόνδε θάπτων αὐτὸς ἐς ταφὰς πέσῃς.

Moreover, justice deems it the mark of a base man for a commoner not to heed those set over him. For never in a city do the laws rightly guide where fear has no footing, nor can an army at least be ruled prudently if it no longer has the defense of fear and shame. No, it is necessary for a man even one by birth strong in body, to expect to fall perchance by a small ill. Whoever has fear and shame together know for certain he has safety; but where there is opportunity to commit outrage and do what one wishes, know that such a state, although having run with fair winds before, falls into the depths. No, let me see fear, whenever opportune, also established and let us not imagine we can do what gives us joy and not in turn endure the punishment of being pained. These things come in turns. This man before was ablaze with committing outrage, but now it's my turn to think presumptuously. And I warn you now not to bury this man, lest you yourself in burying this man fall into the grave.

His brother Agamemnon concurs, arguing further that insubordination of the lower class threatens the order of the state:

Ajax, 1239-1261.

πικροὺς ἔοιγμεν τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὅπλων
ἀγῶνας Ἀργείοισι κηρῶσαι τότε,
εἰ πανταχοῦ φανούμεθ' ἐκ Τεύκρου κακοί,
κοῦκ ἀρκέσει ποθ' ὑμῖν οὐδ' ἡσσημένοις
εἶκειν ἃ τοῖς πολλοῖσιν ἤρσκεν κριταῖς,

I think we shall keenly regret announcing on that day the contests for Achilles' armor if we in every case are going to be thought false by Teucer and you never will be content and, although beaten, never yield to what most

ἀλλ' αἰὲν ἡμᾶς ἢ κακοῖς βαλεῖτέ που
 ἢ σὺν δόλῳ κεντήσεθ' οἱ λελειμμένοι.
 ἐκ τῶνδε μέντοι τῶν τρόπων οὐκ ἄν ποτε
 κατάστασις γένοιτ' ἂν οὐδενὸς νόμου,
 εἰ τοὺς δίκη νικῶντας ἐξωθήσομεν
 καὶ τοὺς ὀπισθεν ἐς τὸ πρόσθεν ἄξομεν.
 ἀλλ' εἰρκτέον τάδ' ἐστίν· οὐ γὰρ οἱ πλατεῖς
 οὐδ' εὐρύνωτοι φῶτες ἀσφαλέστατοι,
 ἀλλ' οἱ φρονοῦντες εὖ κρατοῦσι πανταχοῦ.
 μέγας δὲ πλευρὰ βοῦς ὑπὸ μικρᾶς ὄμως
 μάστιγος ὀρθὸς εἰς ὁδὸν πορεύεται.
 καὶ σοὶ προσέρπον τοῦτ' ἐγὼ τὸ φάρμακον
 ὀρῶ τάχ', εἰ μὴ νοῦν κατακτήσῃ τινά·
 ὃς τάνδρὸς οὐκέτ' ὄντος, ἀλλ' ἤδη σκιᾶς,
 θαρσῶν ὑβρίζεις κἄξελευθεροστομεῖς.
 οὐ σωφρονήσεις; οὐ μαθὼν ὃς εἴ φύσιν
 ἄλλον τιν' ἄξεις ἄνδρα δεῦρ' ἐλεύθερον,
 ὅστις πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀντὶ σοῦ λέξει τὰ σά;

judges were satisfied with, but will always
 somewhere attack us with abuses or stab us in
 the dark, you losers in the race. To be sure from
 these ways no resolute order could ever, ever
 exist if we are to thrust aside those who rightly
 won and bring the losers to the front.
 No, this must be prevented. For it's not the
 strong, broad-shouldered men who are the
 surest from danger but those who think well
 who always win. A large-ribbed ox still treads
 a straight path because of a small whip. And
 this remedy, I think, is coming to you soon if
 you do not gain some sense; you who, although
 the man no longer lives but is now a shade,
 boldly commit outrage and freely wag your
 tongue. Will you not come to your senses? Not
 knowing who you are by birth will you not
 lead some other man here – a freeborn man –
 who will speak on your behalf before us?

Agamemnon argues that it is those who possess *sophrosyne*, not those who use physical force, who are successful (1250-1252). This statement would seem to correlate with Athena's evaluation that the *sophron* does not use the gifts of fortune against others, but in reality the Atreidae's definition of the virtue is vastly different. *Sophrosyne* for the Atreidae is closely tied with their view of nobility. The Atreidae, being nobly born, believe that they are blessed by the gods to keep order in the manner they see fit (1061). Defined by their rank, they evaluate others by their status and are blind to their merits. They are the winners of birth and, therefore, should always be obeyed by the losers (1246-1249; 1071-1072). In their eyes, Teucer, in challenging them, is not acting with *sophrosyne* because his lower-status requires him to obey his leaders without question (1255-1263). Odysseus, because he is more of an equal, is respected (1330-1331), though grudgingly (1370-1372). *Sophrosyne*, on Agamemnon's terms, is when those who have power rule, and those who do not obey (1073-

1076, 1352). There is no objective criterion at the heart of his reasoning; instead, whatever is against their rule is unjust, shameful, and not according to *sophrosyne*. Their *sophrosyne* is ‘be moderate’ in the sense of ‘do not act outside one’s social boundaries,’ but the Atreidae in their actions contradict their own view of *sophrosyne* by disregarding the laws of the gods (1343-1345) in refusing to show *charis* to the dead Ajax (1267). The Atreidae go too far in their rule. They do not pity because they see the differences in status, not the commonalities in nature, between themselves and Ajax (1132-1134; 1356).

When there is insubordination, their primary mode of correction is through the external rule of *phobos* and *aidos* (1075-1076, 1079-1080). Words and reasoning are ineffective in an army because that is not how a rule of fear and shame is carried out. Menelaus believes “it would be disgraceful if anyone learned that I was chastising with words when I could use force” (1159-1160). They prefer compulsion through violence (1067-1072) and silencing of opposition (1147-1149). Because the Atreidae are the determiners of what is just, for the sake of maintaining stability violent actions are justified (1324, 1062-1090) even to the point of committing *hubris*.

The Atreidae do not believe the term ‘*hubris*’ properly applies to them, but instead to those in inferior positions, like Ajax and Teucer, who question their decree (1088; 1257-1258). Their actions, however, constitute *hubris*, as the chorus proclaim (1092). As Fisher repeatedly points out, *hubris* “is essentially a deliberate activity” and can be traced to “specific acts.”¹⁴ Aristotle says *hubris* is “when a man does or says things that cause shame to the one suffering, not in order that something may happen to him, nor because anything

¹⁴ Fisher, p. 1.

has happened to him, but merely for his own pleasure.”¹⁵ It would therefore be one thing if the Atreidae punished Ajax for his attempted murder, but by transgressing the laws of the gods (1131, 1343-1344), overriding justice (1334-1335), and bringing excessive shame on Ajax through denying his right as a mortal for burial and in wishing to defile his corpse, the Atreidae engage in *hubris*.

As they are incapable of friendship, they foster no friendship as the chorus note (619). In their view of nobility, their definition of *sophrosyne*, and their belief on how to rule, they fail to achieve the stability of the state they desire. While fear and shame constitute effective means of maintaining order, particularly in an army, they require the subordination of personal desires for the good of the community, not out of choice but from compulsion. The state may achieve success, but at the expense of the individual.

¹⁵ *Rhetoric*, 2.2.5.

CHAPTER 2: THE *PHILOCTETES*

At the beginning of the *Philoctetes*, Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus to do as he asks and give himself up “for a few hours of shamelessness and later for the rest of time be called the most dutiful of men” (81-85) so that they might accomplish their mission. Prophecy decrees (610-613) that Philoctetes’ bow is required in Troy for the benefit of the Achaeans, and as is revealed towards the end of the play, Philoctetes himself will benefit from going because the cure for his diseased foot is to be found at the city (1332-1347). Thus, Odysseus’ desire to bring Philoctetes back seeks what is best for both the individual and the common good, but the reasoning and methods for the just *telos* of the Odysseus of the *Philoctetes* do not correlate with the *charis* and *sophrosyne* of the Odysseus of the *Ajax*. Nobility, according to Odysseus in the *Philoctetes*, is being victorious no matter the means, a view which he openly discloses to Neoptolemus and Philoctetes:

Philoctetes, 1047-1062.

πόλλ’ ἂν λέγειν ἔχοιμι πρὸς τὰ τοῦδ’ ἔπη,
εἴ μοι παρείκοι· νῦν δ’ ἐνὸς κρατῶ λόγου.
οὗ γὰρ τοιούτων δεῖ, τοιοῦτός εἰμ’ ἐγώ·
χῶπου δικαίων κάγαθων ἀνδρῶν κρίσις,
οὐκ ἂν λάβοις μου μᾶλλον οὐδέν’ εὐσεβῆ.
νικᾶν γε μέντοι πανταχοῦ χρήζων ἔφυν,
πλὴν ἐς σέ· νῦν δὲ σοί γ’ ἐκὼν ἐκστήσομαι.
ἄφετε γὰρ αὐτόν, μηδὲ προσψάυσητ’ ἔτι.
ἔατε μίμνειν. οὐδὲ σοῦ προσχρήζομεν,
τά γ’ ὅπλ’ ἔχοντες ταῦτ’· ἐπεὶ πάρεστι μὲν
Τεῦκρος παρ’ ἡμῖν, τήνδ’ ἐπιστήμην ἔχων,
ἐγὼ θ’, ὃς οἶμαι σοῦ κάκιον οὐδέν’ ἂν
τούτων κρατύνειν, μηδ’ ἐπιθύνειν χερδί.
τί δῆτα σοῦ δεῖ; χαῖρε τὴν Λῆμνον πατῶν.

I could say much in answer to his claims, if time allowed; but now I can say one thing only. What kind of man the occasion demands, that is the man I am. And accordingly, where the judgment at hand is of just and good men, you could find no man more pious than me. Victory, however, is my inborn desire in every field—save with regard to you. To you, in this case, I will gladly give way. Yes, release him, and lay not another finger upon him. Let him stay here. We have no further need of you, now that we have these weapons. For Teucer is there among our forces, well-skilled in this craft, as am I, and I believe that I can master this bow in

ἡμεῖς δ' ἴωμεν. καὶ τάχ' ἄν τὸ σὸν γέρας
τιμὴν ἐμοὶ νείμειεν, ἣν σὲ χρῆν ἔχειν.

no way worse than you, and point it with no
worse a hand. So what need is there of you?
Farewell! Enjoy your strolls on Lemnos! We
must be going. And perhaps your onetime prize
will bring me the honor which ought to have
been your own.

As Odysseus will be whatever sort of man he needs to be (1049) in order to satisfy his inborn desire for victory (1052), his reasoning is relative. His definition of Help Friends/Harm Enemies changes according to the dictates of the moment. A crafty wordsmith, Odysseus has the appearance, but not the substance, of *sophrosyne*. He claims that no one is more 'pious' (εὐσεβῆ, 1051) in obeying the judgments of good and just men; but since he has already made justice and goodness void of real meaning because they too are determined by the dictates of the moment (82-85), his claim to piety is merely a pretense. He sarcastically 'yields' to Philoctetes by granting his desire not to sail to Troy (1055), but he dishonorably takes away Philoctetes' bow, his sole means of survival, so that he effectively dooms Philoctetes to death. In taking the bow, he seeks to gain honor for himself at the direct expense of the undeserving Philoctetes (1061-1062). This rationale leads to *hubris*.

The three mentions of *hubris* in the play apply to the Atreidae's and Odysseus' involvement in the awarding of Achilles' armor. Philoctetes, hearing about Neoptolemus' humiliation (330) asks for details about the act of *hubris* (342), a term echoed by the chorus to describe the Atreidae's actions (396f.). Later on, having been reprimanded by Neoptolemus for his obstinacy in refusing to sail for Troy, Philoctetes reminds him of the *hubris* they committed against him (1364f.). All these references are to the humiliating robbing of a *geras* from its rightful owner, an obvious parallel to the shameful robbing of

Philoctetes' bow, a gift from Heracles. Odysseus' theft of the bow is shown to be *hubristic* in all but name: this is rather fitting in a play concerned with *phusis* in opposition to *nomos* and with words against deeds. His theft is a single act that is meant both to shame and grievously harm an inferior. It is excessive in that, because of the curious presentation of Helenus' prophecy in lines 610-613, Odysseus was free to decide whether to force Philoctetes to go to Troy or to leave him on the island. Of these two shameful choices Odysseus chooses the more shameful and ignoble because by leaving Philoctetes alone and helpless on the island, he is committing the antithesis of *charis*.

Just like the Atreidae, Odysseus places the common good over the good of the individual, thereby making politics the basis of ethics. He denies Philoctetes the right of choice and abuses his *philia* with Neoptolemus by tricking him into behaving against his noble *phusis* (79-80; 88-89) in order to gain victory. It is fitting that Odysseus says Athena Polias as Nike brings him success and safety (134). His cunning serves victory and the *polis*; yet his *hubris* would, without the intervention of the noble Heracles, prevent the success of his mission.

Neoptolemus expressly declares his desire to be *eugenes*, by living up to his own and his father's nature (86-89). It is this desire that Odysseus perverts by cajoling Neoptolemus into following his plan by promising he will be called *eusebestatos* (83-85), and *sophos* and *agathos* (119). Neoptolemus, however, comes to reject Odysseus' ethics because he realizes that it is the essence, the *phusis*, that determines character rather than any superficial name it bears. The progression in Neoptolemus' view of nobility provides a rich example for the emotions' role in *sophrosyne*. His decision that acting according to nobility requires him to help his *philos* elucidates the relationship between *philia* and nobility.

After becoming instant friends with the young warrior, Philoctetes thrice calls Neoptolemus noble. Philoctetes, overcome by an intense wave of pain from his wound, beseeches the *gennaion teknon* (799) to help him, just as he once helped Heracles, and not to leave him alone (808-809). Neoptolemus, out of the pain he feels at seeing the man in his misfortune (806), remains, comforting Philoctetes as best he can. After waking from his slumber, Philoctetes praises the youth for his endurance in staying by him even though it is personally inconvenient for him (876). He contrasts the youth's noble nature (εὐγενῆς γὰρ ἡ φύσις καὶ εὐγενῶν, 874) with that of the Atreidae (872-875). Neoptolemus, who had feared that death was near, rejoices to see Philoctetes free from pain. While helping Philoctetes to his feet, he suddenly realizes (παπαῖ, 895) the implications of his actions. He is forsaking his true nature (902-903) and fears most of all to be base (906), but he does not know what to do. He is in *aporia* (807). He is pulled between the conflicting claims of duty (τό τ' ἔνδικον, 926) and advantage (τὸ συμφέρον, 926) on the one hand, and his friendship with Philoctetes on the other. After the disclosure of his actual intentions, Neoptolemus is silent for the next 146 lines except for two statements, the repetition of his *aporia* and a suggestion of what releases him from it: strange pity (οἶκτος δεινός, 965-966). After silently listening, for the most part, to the stinging *rhexis* of Philoctetes (927-962) and the heated *stichomythia* between Philoctetes and the newly returned Odysseus, Neoptolemus has come to his decision. He will help Philoctetes.

The steps of his reasoning can be traced through his speeches. Neoptolemus' change in reasoning (1074-1075) is first instigated upon his recognition of the pity he has been feeling for Philoctetes since seeing his newfound friend in such great pain. He even feared for his death. His awareness of his visceral response to Philoctetes' pain and the self-

examination his pity prompts leads him to change his course of action. He decides to return the *charis* of friendship Philoctetes earlier gave him with his own *charis*. After returning the bow and preparing to conduct Philoctetes back home, as his friend wishes, Neoptolemus for the third time is marked as noble. In this instance, rather than being described as *gennaios*, Neoptolemus' *charis* – that is, the manifestation of his *sophrosyne* – is deemed 'noble' by Philoctetes: "oh what a noble word you have spoken!" (ὦ γενναῖον εἰρηκῶς ἔπος, 1402). Before, Neoptolemus sought to live up to the nobility of his father; now, his actions towards Philoctetes substantiate his earlier words, showing that he is in fact noble in character and not just in name (1310).

As Blundell insightfully recognizes, in order for Neoptolemus' motives to remain pure he cannot be the one who finally succeeds in persuading Philoctetes to sail for Troy, as the myth and prophecy mandate, because his returning of the bow could be construed as merely another means to get his way according to "Odyssean self-interest."¹⁶ Through Heracles' *deus ex machina*, Neoptolemus' nobility is proven to be according to *charis* alone and, moreover, is authenticated by the god's speech. Heracles' motives, his self-identification with the two mortals, and his exhortation all correlate with Neoptolemus' reasoning, so that his speech provides a perfect summation for Neoptolemus' ethics:

Philoctetes, 1413-1422; 1433-1444.

τὴν σὴν δ' ἤκω χάριν οὐρανίας
ἔδρας προλιπών,
τὰ Διός τε φράσων βουλευμάτα σοι,

And for your benefit I have come
leaving behind the seats of heaven, to show
you the will of Zeus, and to hold you back

¹⁶ Blundell, p. 223.

κατερητύσων θ' ὁδὸν ἣν στέλλῃ·
σὺ δ' ἐμῶν μύθων ἐπάκουσον.
καὶ πρῶτα μὲν σοὶ τὰς ἐμὰς λέξω τύχας,
ὅσους πονήσας καὶ διεξελθὼν πόνους
ἀθάνατον ἀρετὴν ἔσχον, ὥς πάρεσθ' ὁρᾶν
καὶ σοί, σάφ' ἴσθι, τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν,
ἐκ τῶν πόνων τῶνδ' εὐκλεᾶ θέσθαι βίον.

...
καὶ σοὶ ταῦτ', Ἀχιλλέως τέκνον,
παρήνεσ'· οὔτε γὰρ σὺ τοῦδ' ἄτερ σθένεις
ἐλεῖν τὸ Τροίας πεδῖον οὔθ' οὔτος σέθεν·
ἀλλ' ὥς λέοντε συννόμῳ φυλάσσετον
οὔτος σὲ καὶ σὺ τόνδ'. ἐγὼ δ' Ἀσκληπιὸν
παυστήρα πέμψω σῆς νόσου πρὸς Ἴλιον.
τὸ δεύτερον γὰρ τοῖς ἐμοῖς αὐτὴν χρεῶν
τόξοις ἀλῶναι. τοῦτο δ' ἐννοεῖθ', ὅταν
πορθῇτε γαίαν, εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεούς·
ὥς τᾶλλα πάντα δευτέρ' ἡγεῖται πατήρ
Ζεὺς. οὐ γὰρ ἡυσέβεια συνθνήσκει βροτοῖς·
κἂν ζῶσι κἂν θάνωσιν, οὐκ ἀπόλλυται.

from the journey which you are preparing for;
so hear my words. First I shall tell you my
fortunes, how many labors I underwent and
completed to the very end. I won deathless
excellence, as you see before you now. Know
well that for you too suffering is destined, that
from these sufferings you will make for
yourself a glorious life.

...
Son of Achilles, the same advice applies to
you too; for without him you will not have the
power to take the plain of Troy nor he without
you; but like two kindred lions on the hunt
this man must guard you and you this man.
[turns to Philoctetes] And I shall send
Asclepius to Troy to end your sickness
because it is destined to be taken by my
arrows for a second time. But both of you
remember this, whenever you ravage the land,
show reverence to the gods; as all other things
father Zeus regards as second; for reverence
to the gods does not die with men; whether
they are alive or dead, it is never lost.

Heracles, connecting with the two mortals through their shared fortunes, praises friendship and the personal and political success it brings. He comes to rectify the situation out of a sense of *charis* (τὴν σὴν δ' ἤκω χάριν, 1413), in particular because Philoctetes was his friend and showed him *charis* in the past (801-803). He encapsulates Philoctetes' and Neoptolemus' relationship with the simile found in lines 1436-1437: "... like two kindred lions on the hunt this man must guard you and you this man." In an earlier statement, Neoptolemus declared that "whoever knows how to return a kindness is a friend more precious than any possession" (671-674). By returning the bow, Neoptolemus proves that he, as a noble man, is the best sort of friend. It is through *philia* that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes will be unbeatable, bringing success both for themselves and for their community.

CHAPTER 3: THE *OEDIPUS AT COLONUS*

The *Oedipus at Colonus* features the most obvious example of a noble character to be found in Sophocles' tragedies. Theseus' resolute *ethos* coupled with his succinctly expressed speeches mark him as noble; indeed, he is distinctly associated with nobility three times during the course of the play, twice by Oedipus and once by the Messenger.¹⁷ The first instance is in response to Theseus' expression of his ethics in his very first speech; the other two instances are in response to the manifestations of these ethics in his actions. Theseus' first speech in particular provides a rich illustration for how pity is part of rational judgment.

After being summoned by the chorus concerning Oedipus' defilement of the sacred grove, Theseus appears, immediately recognizing and pitying the foreigner. In this speech, Theseus reveals how he perceives the world and how his comprehension of it motivates his actions. In response, Oedipus deems that Theseus' praiseworthy words and promised actions constitute 'nobility' (τὸ σὸν γενναῖον, 571).

OC, 551-568.

πολλῶν ἀκούων ἔν τε τῷ πάρος χρόνῳ
τὰς αἵματηρὰς ὁμμάτων διαφθορὰς
ἔγνωκά σ', ὃ παῖ Λαΐου, τανῦν θ' ὁδοῖς
ἐν ταῖσδε ἀκούων μᾶλλον ἐξεπίσταμαι.
σκευὴ τε γάρ σε καὶ τὸ δύστηνον κάρα
δηλοῦτον ἡμῖν ὄνθ' ὃς εἶ, καί σ' οἰκτίσας
θέλω 'περέσθαι, δύσμορ' Οἰδίπου, τίνα
πόλεως ἐπέστης προστροπὴν ἐμοῦ τ' ἔχων,
αὐτός τε χὴ σὴ δύσμορος παραστάτις.
δίδασκε· δεινὴν γάρ τιν' ἂν πρᾶξιν τύχοις

Through hearing from many in the past about
the bloody blinding of your eyes, I recognized
you, son of Laius, and now hearing more on
my way here I am certain. For your attire and
unhappy demeanor make it clear to me who
you are and so from my pity I wish to enquire,
ill-fated Oedipus, what is this petition you
have set before the city and me, you yourself
and your unfortunate companion with you.
Tell me: for you would have to speak of an

¹⁷ Because of Oedipus' characterization as a quasi-prophet favored by the gods, his statements concerning Theseus' nobility are highly authoritative.

λέξας ὁποίας ἐξαφισταίμην ἐγώ·
 ὥς οἶδά καὶ τὸς ὥς ἐπαιδεύθην ξένος,
 ὥσπερ σύ, χῶς τις πλεῖστ' ἀνὴρ ἐπὶ ξένης
 ἦθλησα κινδυνεύματ' ἐν τῷ μῶ κάρᾳ,
 ὥστε ξένον γ' ἂν οὐδέν' ὄνθ', ὥσπερ σὺ
 νῦν, ὑπεκτραποίμην μὴ οὐ συνεκσώζειν· ἐπεὶ
 ἔξοιδ' ἀνὴρ ὢν χῶτι τῆς ἐς αὔριον
 οὐδέν πλεόν μοι σοῦ μέτεστιν ἡμέρας.

awful petition for me to withdraw from it;
 since I too know what it is to be an exile, just
 as you are, as I was raised in exile and in exile
 contended with dangers to my life like no
 other man; so that I would never turn aside
 from a stranger or refuse to help save him;
 since I know very well that I am a man and
 that I have no more claim on tomorrow than
 you.

The speech itself is a rational progression from perception, to conjecture, to knowledge, to a general truth that motivates Theseus' active desire to help Oedipus, but his reasoning is based upon and shaped by pity. In the first section (551-559), Theseus recognizes Oedipus through two means, hearsay and personal perception, that together form his *episteme* (ἐξεπίσταμαι, 554) of who Oedipus is. As the explanatory γάρ (555) indicates, his *episteme* directly leads to his pity (καί σ' οἰκτίσας, 556) and his pity in turn further shapes his *episteme*, resulting in his desire to help Oedipus. While beginning as a visceral reaction to Oedipus' mien, this pity becomes a rational judgment through Theseus' awareness of the emotion. Robert Solomon's argument about emotions and choice can be usefully adapted here: because Theseus is aware he feels pity, he is no longer *being* compassionate but *acting* compassionate. His pity is no longer an impulsive reaction but a matter of choice. His pity, then, shapes his reasoning and his reasoning shapes his pity, culminating in a general truth (567-568), which is really an extension of his *episteme* of Oedipus. Theseus pities the painful misfortune of Oedipus on two levels: he has personally experienced a similar misfortune in the past and knows that he will experience the same, general fate of death in the future. Recognizing that they have similar experiences and, as mortals, share the same opposition to time, Theseus immediately views Oedipus as his friend (891, 1169, 1631). Like Neoptolemus

who gave *charis* to Philoctetes, thus enabling him to choose for himself, Theseus offers Oedipus protection to make whatever choice he wishes (638-641).

The other two instances of Theseus' marked nobility occur after he has through action demonstrated the ethics that he has already expressed in speech. After Theseus prevents Creon's violence against Oedipus and promises to restore his daughters, Oedipus blesses him for the sake of his 'nobility' (τοῦ τε γενναίου χάριν, 1042). Later, Theseus' subordination of his own personal grief (1636) for the care of Oedipus' children is deemed by the Messenger to be done "like a nobleman" (ὡς ἀνὴρ γενναῖος, 1636).

It is striking that in all three marked references to his nobility, Theseus himself is not directly called γενναῖος; instead, either his actions and words are identified with the abstract τὸ γενναῖον or he is compared to the ideal γενναῖος. This abstraction of his nobility is no small point of semantics. Theseus, as the son of Athens' king, is undeniably γενναῖος in the strict sense that he is noble in birth, but Theseus' τὸ γενναῖον is nobility that directly results from his decisions and actions. Since according to Aristotle it is choice that determines *ethos*¹⁸ rather than inherent qualities of character (such as noble birth), Theseus' character achieves true nobility because it stems from choice rather than chance. It is this active aspect of nobility that Oedipus praises.

Creon provides the clearest example of a character without the qualities of an ethically noble man. He is the antithesis of Theseus because he does not possess *sophrosyne*, he commits *hubris*, and he prevents *philia*. His ignoble ethics stem from his narrow definition

¹⁸ *Poetics*, 1450b 8-10.

of nobility, as is shown in his first speech. With the thin veil of respect he presents soon discarded, he quickly reveals his true intentions and the violent means of fulfilling them.

OC, 728-760.

ἄνδρες χθονὸς τῆσδ' εὐγενεῖς οἰκήτορες,
ὁρῶ τιν' ὑμᾶς ὁμμάτων εἰληφότας
φόβον νεώρη τῆς ἐμῆς ἐπεισόδου·
ὄν μήτ' ὀκνεῖτε μήτ' ἀφῆτ' ἔπος κακόν.
ἦκω γὰρ οὐχ ὥς δρᾶν τι βουλευθείς, ἐπεὶ
γέρον μέν εἰμι, πρὸς πόλιν δ' ἐπίσταμαι
σθένουσιν ἥκων, εἴ τιν' Ἑλλάδος, μέγα.
ἀλλ' ἄνδρα τόνδε τηλικόσδ' ἀπεστάλην
πίστων ἔπεσθαι πρὸς τὸ Καδμείων πέδον,
οὐκ ἐξ ἐνὸς στεῖλαντος, ἀλλ' ἀστῶν ὑπὸ
πάντων κελευσθείς, οὐνεχ' ἦκέ μοι γένει
τὰ τοῦδε πενθεῖν πῆματ' εἰς πλεῖστον πόλεως.
ἀλλ', ὦ ταλαίπωρ' Οἰδίπους, κλυὼν ἐμοῦ
ἰκοῦ πρὸς οἴκους. πᾶς σε Καδμείων λεῶς
καλεῖ δικαίως, ἐκ δὲ τῶν μάλιστ' ἐγώ·
ὄσπερ, εἰ μὴ πλεῖστον ἀνθρώπων ἔφυν
μάλιστα δ' ἀλγῶ τοῖσι σοῖς κακοῖς, γέρον,
ὁρῶν σε τὸν δύστηνον ὄντα μὲν ξένον,
αἰεὶ δ' ἀλήτην κάπῃ προσπόλου μιᾶς
βιοστερῇ χωροῦντα, τὴν ἐγὼ τάλας
οὐκ ἂν ποτ' ἐς τοσοῦτον αἰκίας πεσεῖν
ἔδοξ', ὅσον πέπτωκεν ἡδε δύσμορος,
αἰεὶ σε κηδεύουσα καὶ τὸ σὸν κᾶρα
πτωχῶ διαίτη, τηλικούτος, οὐ γάμων
ἔμπειρος, ἀλλὰ τοῦπιόντος ἀρπάσαι.
ἄρ' ἄθλιον τοῦνειδος, ὦ τάλας ἐγώ,
ὠνείδισ' ἐς σὲ κἀμὲ καὶ τὸ πᾶν γένος;
ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ ἔστι τὰμφανῇ κρύπτειν, σὺ νῦν
πρὸς θεῶν πατρώων, Οἰδίπους, πεισθεὶς ἐμοὶ
κρύψον θελήσας ἄστῃ καὶ δόμους μολεῖν
τοὺς σοὺς πατρώους, τήνδε τὴν πόλιν φίλως
εἰπών· ἐπαξία γάρ· ἢ δ' οἴκοι πλέον
δίκη σέβοιτ' ἄν, οὔσα σὴ πάλαι τροφός.

Noble sirs, dwellers of this land, I see from your eyes that a sudden fear has seized you about my coming; yet do not shrink nor let loose an unkind word, for I have come with no wish to do any harm; I am an old man and I know very well that the city I have come to is powerful, if any of Hellas has might. No, I have been dispatched, such an age as I am, to prevail upon this man here to follow me to the land of Cadmus, not because one man sent me, but charged by all the citizens, since it came to me by birth to mourn for this man's calamities more than any other of the city. Come, unhappy Oedipus, hear me and come home. All the Kadmeian people justly call upon you, and I most of all; so greatly do I – unless I was utterly born the basest of men – sorrow at these evils of yours, old man, seeing you be misfortunate, a stranger, and always a wanderer and with one poor girl as a traveling companion. Ah me, I never thought she would fall to such a depth of outrage as that which this poor girl has fallen into, always tending you and your head with a beggar's way of life, in such youth yet not been wed, but a prize for the first comer to seize. What a cruel reproach, oh wretched me, I have uttered against you and me and our entire race? But indeed open things cannot be hidden, so then you by the gods of our fathers, Oedipus, obey me and hide this, by willingly returning to the city and the homes of your fathers, after a friendly goodbye to this city; it deserves it; but your home city by right ought to be revered more, as it nursed you long ago.

Creon begins his speech by addressing the noble chorus (ἄνδρες χθονὸς τῆσδ' εὐγενεῖς οἰκήτορες, 728), but precisely what he means by 'noble' is soon revealed. His *episteme* (ἐπίσταμαι, 723) is that the Athenians are noble because their city is powerful (733-734). It is in terms of power that he evaluates the worth of the other characters, namely by their status compared to his. He condescendingly judges Oedipus by his outward appearance as a weak old man (744) and evaluates his worth according to his usefulness for the advancement of Thebes. Creon makes a show of mourning for Oedipus in his miserable exile (745-747) and for Antigone because her status is lowered by association with Oedipus (747-752) yet, unlike Theseus, Creon does not see Oedipus and his daughters as equals because he does not pity them. His so-called exclamation of pity is really self-regarding (753-754). When seeing Oedipus and his daughters, Creon sees the disparity in status between them rather than the individuals themselves. He only mourns for them because, as they happen to be related, their bad fortune reflects poorly upon himself (738-739). He highlights Oedipus' and Antigone's isolation from society in contrast to his own position which sees the city (741, 758) and the gods of their fathers on his side (756). Through the action in the lines following this speech, Creon reveals the violence of his ethics.

Creon is obsessed with gaining power and status. Like Odysseus in the *Philoctetes*, he shapes his behavior according to *kairos*; that is, what the particular moment dictates (808, 826-827). Creon initially tries to get his way through deceit, promising that he does not intend any harm (732) because he is a weak old man and no threat to such a powerful city. However, he is not skilled in deception, and his expressions of pity scarcely conceal his contempt and selfish motives. Because Oedipus immediately sees through his hypocritical mask, Creon resorts to open violence. His veiled threats (813-814) soon turn into blunt

threats that Oedipus will suffer pain (816). His insincerity is demonstrated when he reveals that he had in fact already seized one daughter even before he spoke to Oedipus (818-819) and now intends to take the other (821), though he vows not to touch Oedipus (830). This vow is swiftly repudiated as his anger heightens (874-875), for he subsequently threatens to seize Oedipus himself (858-864). Boldly disregarding the claims of *xenia*, Oedipus' personal best interests, and the sovereignty of Athens, he seeks power for himself. Creon, treating them as instruments for his own use, has no respect for those who like Oedipus and his daughters do not have power. He regards the daughters as his belongings (830-832; 839) and therefore considers himself justified in violently seizing them for the purpose of blackmailing Oedipus. With similar reasoning to that employed by the Atreidae of the *Ajax*, Creon believes that, because they are weaker and inferior, the girls must yield to him, regardless of the fact that he does not have their personal best interests in mind. Only the immediate threat of greater power by Theseus (862) prevents Creon from getting his way: he is unmoved by Oedipus' moral argument (939-959). In return, he vows to seek retribution when opportunity allows (956-959; 1036-1037).

Creon's reasoning, his obsession with status, and his unrestrained emotions are the opposite of Theseus' *sophrosyne*. His violent actions (903), impiety (823), unrestrained anger (874), and insolent actions (877, 960) stem from his concept of nobility as being strictly determined by birth. Creon, in seeking to gain the things commensurate with his noble birth, ends up behaving contrary to his nature, as Theseus states (904-918). His ancestry makes him seem just, but his actions are wrong (937-938).

Creon's behavior is succinctly and chillingly expressed when he responds to the chorus' cry that his action constituted *hubris*: "It's *hubris*, but you will have to deal with it"

(883). Creon himself derives pleasure from being ‘kind’ against the will of others (775); in wrongfully treating both Oedipus and the city that protects the suppliant (1029) he is able to enjoy a sense of superiority that suits his obsession with status: “... the cause of the pleasure felt by those who insult is that, in treating others badly, they are more fully showing superiority.”¹⁹ As an action, *hubris* is chosen, but in contrast to the noble characters who choose to protect the choice of others, Creon’s *hubris* leads to compulsion rather than choice. In lines that invite a contrast with Tecmessa’s *eugenes aner*, Oedipus says that Creon’s *charis* brings no *charis* (779). Creon’s behavior is so reprehensible because he abuses his good fortune, position, and power to harm others. Even if his actions were for a just cause, his flagrant disregard of law and use of force makes him a disgrace to his family and his city (904-918). On the pretext of benefitting his *philoï*, Creon prevents *philia*. He divides daughters from father, Oedipus from his friends, and himself from any true filial connection.

The implications of equating nobility of birth with nobility of character are fully revealed in the final lines of Creon’s first speech. He asserts to Oedipus that his birth city, despite its present corruption and the fact that she disowned him, should be revered more than foreign Athens, the noble city of merit (759-760). Reduced to its most basic premise, Creon’s argument is that chance outcomes of fate are more important than merit and personal responsibility. In such reasoning there is, ultimately, no room for choice.

¹⁹ *Rhetoric* 2.2.6.

CONCLUSION

The *telos* for a human, Aristotle argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is *eudaimonia*, which is “complete and self-sufficient (*autarkes*)”²⁰ By self-sufficient he means “the things which by themselves make life choice-worthy and lacking in nothing.”²¹ For the characters of Sophocles’ tragedies, the greatest impediment to *eudaimonia* is time – “all things are withered by mighty time” (*Ajax*, 714) – but their greatest impediment to complete success in the face of time is their own human nature: mortal *ate* and impulsive emotions prevent clear judgments. Oedipus’ anger leads to patricide, instigating a series of misfortunate events, and to an unwillingness to listen to others. Deianira, out of a paralyzing fear for the future, does not realize that the ‘love potion’ given to her in the past by Nessus is in fact a deadly poison. Philoctetes is so occupied with Neoptolemus’ past deceit he does not realize that his honesty is the mark of a true friend and that the advice to go to Troy is for his own good. Elektra is unaware that her claim to justice rooted in her victimhood is very similar to that of her mother whom she despises so much. Ajax fails to see the madness in trying to rectify *hubris* with *hubris*. Antigone and Creon fail to see their own hypocrisy and refuse to acknowledge that the other side’s claim has a degree of justice to it too.

The three ignoble characters examined in this thesis through their narrow reasoning are hypocritical and commit extreme acts of violence and *hubris* in the name of justice. They believe they are seeking *autarkeia*, but in reality, having mistaken the attributes of self-sufficiency for the thing itself, they pursue their own narrow definition of success to

²⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b 20-21.

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b 8-11.

extremes. Though they, like the noble characters, enjoy self-sufficiency in a certain sense because of their noble birth and the resources it provides, their self-sufficiency is not ‘complete.’ The noble characters, in contrast, through *philia* gain a more ‘complete’ self-sufficiency than material wealth or status could provide. They use their status and resources to help others and in doing so help themselves.

The political success of nobility is *philia*. Friendship is the strongest communal bond and protects the rights of individuals while ensuring the common good. Odysseus protects the individual excellence of Ajax from the Atreidae’s shame. In so doing, he also upholds the customs of burial and the merit-based rewards of warfare that unite the community. Because of Neoptolemus’ noble actions, Philoctetes is able to express his individual right to choose what he wants for himself while being shown that what is best for himself is also for the common good at Troy. In helping Oedipus, Theseus not only gains a friend but a blessing for his city.

Philia, in addition to being a political success, is also a personal success. A true friend is a personal pleasure in itself as Neoptolemus stated: “whoever knows how to do good after receiving good is a friend more precious than any possession” (672-674); but, in a somewhat paradoxical way, *philia* also ensures self-sufficiency by leading to the success that is brought about by *sophrosyne*, a freedom from *ate*. For the characters of Sophocles’ tragedies others are needed to act as a mirror for their own thinking and actions, as Odysseus said to Agamemnon: “You win when you give in to friends” (*Ajax*, 1354). Because their *sophrosyne* stems from pity and because pity requires another person to be present for it to be aroused, the noble man must interact with others to gain a mastery over himself.

Sophrosyne allows a mastery over oneself as it enables the emotions to be subjected to choice. Although no one can choose when first to feel an emotion, he can by opening himself to persuasion ‘diffuse’ the emotion, as Robert Solomon argued. An impulsive reaction through self-awareness becomes a matter of choice. Theseus realizes he is angry with Creon, but through his awareness he is no longer *being* angry but *acting* angry. His emotion is now subject to choice; he can choose to pursue, restrain, or dismiss his anger accordingly. He chooses to check his anger lest it lead to personal vengeance rather than justice according to law (*OC*, 904-918). Odysseus restrains the hostility he feels toward Ajax for his attempted murder, thereby turning his pity into an active choice (*Ajax*, 121-126). Once he is aware of his own pity and the ramifications of Odysseus’ ethics, Neoptolemus chooses to follow his pity and help Philoctetes (*Philoctetes*, 1074-1080), but he also later chooses to put his pity for Philoctetes aside in order to prevent Philoctetes from harming Odysseus (*Philoctetes*, 1295-1304). Thus, the virtue of *sophrosyne* is not to live a life devoid of emotion, but to be willingly self-aware, to self-examine, and to challenge both emotions and pre-held notions.²² This power over oneself is good for the individual and the state – hence tragedy’s political importance.

Tragedy, which seeks simultaneously to arouse emotions and prompt reasoning, is effective in eliciting *sophrosyne* in the audience. Tragedy is able to be, as Oliver Taplin phrased it, “essentially the emotional experience of its audience,”²³ because tragedy first is

²² In a sense, through the pity and fear that motivate their *sophrosyne*, the noble characters achieve Aristotle’s *catharsis* of emotion (*Poetics*, 1449b 23-28). Their ‘purgation’ of emotions is not an elimination but a distillation. In being able to choose whether to continue an emotion or not, the noble character rids emotions of their compulsive aspects and turns them into positive forces for action.

²³ Taplin, p. 10.

the emotional experience of the characters. The didacticism of tragedy is learning not *what* to think but *how* to think. As Taplin remarked, “understanding, reason, learning, moral discrimination” are not incompatible with emotion; what is “is cold insensibility.”²⁴ The noble characters’ *sophrosyne* and their openness to the effects of emotion provide an example in how best to deliberate about tragedy and the serious questions it asks.

Since all humans “are phantoms or a fleeting shadow” (*Ajax*, 125-126), “know nothing for certain” and “are all at sea” (*Ajax*, 23), and that no man “has a greater share in tomorrow” (*OC*, 568) than anyone else, all humans are essentially equal in birth. Therefore, what really constitutes acting according to ‘nobility’ is living according to an ideal *phusis* and not human capacity. As the *phren* is mortal, acting with *sophrosyne* is attempting to order the *phren* towards a state of perfect and continual safety (σῶς), the “deathless excellence” (*Philoctetes*, 1420) Heracles achieved. Herein lies the tragedy of these plays: humans desperately seek an excellence beyond their natural capacity. This pursuit is best described by the Greek word *deinos* – strange, wondrous, cunning, dangerous, and marvelous. As the chorus in the *Antigone* sing, “Many are the wonders, but nothing is more wonderful than man” (*Antigone*, 332-333).

²⁴ Taplin, p. 11.

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